



Managing, Leading, and Bossing

Stan Emelander

Leaders fascinate us. From the smallest shop to the largest corporations, employees observe, speculate on, and talk about their chiefs; if you are ever at a loss for a conversation starter, “Tell me about your boss” will work. Another great question is, “What’s the difference between a leader and a manager?”

Early in my career, I thought there was no significant difference between managers and leaders and that talking about distinctions between the two was a waste of time, just an exercise in semantics. Now I am convinced of the opposite; although the positions do overlap, there is a real difference between the roles of manager and leader, and the distinction is important. In fact, those in a position of responsibility who do not understand the differences between managers, leaders, and a third category, bosses, are likely to be mistaken about their own role and the effect they have on others.

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE AUG 2011		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Managing, Leading, and Bossing				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Defense Acquisition University, Defense AT&L, 9820 Belvoir Road, Fort Belvoir, VA, 22060-5565				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 3	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Managers

Not long ago, a friend told me, “Managers manage things; leaders lead people.” That’s a good starting point, but I like a slightly different emphasis: Managers are concerned with performance to standard. The things being managed can be either processes or persons, but the emphasis is on meeting an established level of performance and delivering expected results. In the process of achieving goals, managers communicate standards, secure resources, and remove constraints affecting their people. Managers are generalists who often work in dynamic environments, weighing and integrating diverse variables in pursuit of established objectives. To perform effectively, managers often draw upon advanced technical knowledge and/or considerable general insights into how things and people work.

The broad knowledge base of managers can itself be considered a specialized technical skill set. The project management discipline is a strong example of this idea. Professional project managers are expected to be technically skilled in a wide-ranging set of competencies including scheduling, resource management, communications, and risk management. The ability to be aware of and balance these considerations is a technical skill itself and distinguishes project management as a distinct discipline.

Leaders

I have a progressive, positivist view of leaders, based on the transformational leadership model. Leaders are those who enable followers to exceed expectations and who implement change in organizations. Whereas managers work within the bounds of expectations, leaders inspire and empower workers to establish goals that exceed what they were capable of on their own. Leaders also reinforce workers’ sense of competence and intrinsic motivation, enabling new growth. The ability to envision new potentials and bring them into being is less common than the skills of efficiency and effectiveness in achieving established goals. This explains why strong leaders seem to be rarer than competent managers.

Notice the emphasis on followers. Leaders are change agents, and although they can develop a vision of what the organization needs to become, followers hold the power to make the vision a reality. As the saying goes, “A leader without followers is just a guy out for a walk.” Lasting, effective change occurs in organizations when followers willingly implement it. In my view, true leaders are a benefit to their followers, and one may include the virtues of empathy and respect for others among leadership character traits. These are also skills associated with effective change management, and change is the core purpose of leadership.

While the distinct goals of managing and leading merit recognition, in practice the roles may overlap. Because managers need to be effective communicators and be trustworthy, they often act in a very leader-like manner. By securing resources, removing obstacles, and providing timely and accurate feed-

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back, managers may empower workers to exceed expectations like a leader. Leaders, similar to managers, enhance their credibility by being technically knowledgeable of the tactics and techniques of their followers. Effective leaders may be technical experts in their own areas of specialization, fields such as change management, innovation, and strategy formulation. Effective management and leadership may blend in many supervisory positions when those in charge need to apply standard methods to achieve new objectives. Bosses, however, have different agendas and methods than true managers and leaders.

Bosses

Every organization includes supervisors who lack general or technical skills, or who neither inspire nor benefit the people under their control. A good manager knows how to effectively work with the human resources within their span of supervision. A great leader moves the organization forward to new capabilities by enabling and enhancing workers. I label the people who do neither of these bosses. In contrast to helping the organization by supporting workers, bosses concentrate on their image, power, and future gains. Narcissism is a trait common to these anti-leaders.

One broadly recognized leadership type is the narcissistic leader. As you could guess, the narcissistic leader is concerned foremost about themselves. They are argumentative, competitive, and fundamentally insecure about their own capabilities and relationships. Work environments that include a narcissistic boss are unstable because the supervisor micromanages and competes with others, including his/her followers. Narcissistic personality types have difficulty considering the perspective and feelings of others, contributing to low workplace motivation and morale. Most tragically, narcissistic leaders are often willing to exploit followers as means to a personal end. While there are some narcissistic leaders who

have exceptional charisma and vision, they are very rare. The rest are a variety of boss.

The problems with bosses are that they often don't know what they are doing, and they cause harm. Micromanagement fritters away the resources workers need to achieve standards and wears people down. Bosses may have forceful personalities and a practiced knack for ordering people around, but if they cannot lead beyond business-as-usual goals or build up people's capabilities, they have missed the big picture of leadership. As managers or as leaders, they do not know how to handle the firm's most important resource: people. One of the common costs associated with boss-type behavior is employee turnover. As another saying goes, "People don't leave jobs; they leave managers."

Another weakness of bosses is a lack of self-awareness. Self-awareness and monitoring are attributes of managers and leaders who grow throughout their careers, and realistic self-assessment is antithetical to a narcissistic perspective. The drive to improve includes the capacity for honest self-evaluation and the motivation to seek answers leading to higher levels of personal and organizational performance. Growing managers/leaders extend the need to realistically assess capabilities and performance to include themselves, including their own assumptions and views. Those attributes are missing in bosses. A supervisor with a natural talent for getting things done, but who is self-satisfied and complacent in their role may be headed towards being a boss.

Recommendations for Avoiding the Boss Syndrome

Over and over, the difference between mediocre and excellent performance is shown to be the extra effort to go beyond low expectations and the easiest way of doing things. When implementing organizational change, for instance, the easiest way to start is by fiat from the top. That is also the most failure-prone method. It takes real effort to frame the reasons for change in a way that can be articulated to workers, communicate those reasons, and receive feedback. To do these things, a leader does not have to be smarter, more charming, or better-looking but does need the courage to ignore the inner voice that says, "Just tell them to do it; it's what they're getting paid for."

Likewise, the easiest way to manage is to repeat what you have experienced coming up through the ranks, probably including some bad habits. Both managers and leaders fall short of their potential when they rely on "common knowledge," old-school approaches for working with followers. Yet the temptation to rest on old routines is hard to resist. Here are two approaches for fighting stale habits.

Reflective Learning

One of the hardest yet most valuable activities managers can pursue is reflective learning. This kind of learning occurs when one considers the experiences of the recent past, analyzes the methods used, and reflects on the outcomes. The benefits of

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self-reflection include improved performance and re-validation of goals. Reflective learning is akin to the triple-loop learning process. The process includes learning something new or developing a plan (single loop), reflecting on what you've learned and whether your assumptions are valid (double loop) and analyzing how well you are doing (triple loop).

Evidence-Based Management

EBM is a powerful theme for decision making. As its name implies, it emphasizes fact over opinion. Supervisors who integrate an EBM perspective into their thinking are not satisfied with opinion and anecdote as the basis for decision making. Instead, they push themselves and their followers to discover what expert-, research-, and fact-based evidence is available to support important decision and processes. Information on hiring, leadership, training, rewards, and burnout is readily available from the Internet, libraries, and consultants. Reliance on facts de-emphasizes feelings and ego involvement in decision making, keeping that narcissist in all of us under control.

Although this article focused on benefits to followers and organizations from effective leadership and management, the supervisors gain much as well. In addition to professional success, deep satisfaction is an outcome associated with an orientation towards helping others and achieving goals linked to core values. The status-driven motivation of narcissistic leadership, on the other hand, is linked to loss of fulfillment. The efforts involved in focusing outside oneself are greater, but the rewards are as well.

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